Copyright © Exchange Press, Inc.
All rights reserved. A single copy of these materials may be reprinted for noncommercial personal use only.
Visit us at www.ChildCareExchange.com or call (800) 221-2864.

The Value of Having a Thicker Skin in a (Sometimes) Thin-skinned Profession

by Sean Durham and Holly Elissa Bruno

Teachers as Role Models

Children closely observe interactions among adults in our profession, especially when those interactions are spontaneous and emotionally charged. For a child, the things adults say and do are powerful examples for learning life skills. How we give and receive feedback, express personal values, deal with emotions, and even 'rub each other the wrong way' teach children how to navigate bumps in the road in their emotions and relationships. Given that the unwritten command is for us to

Dr. Sean Durham is an assistant professor in curriculum and teaching and the early childhood teacher licensure program coordinator at Auburn University. He is a past director of a university lab school, preschool administrator, school principal, and teacher. His work in early childhood began over 20 years ago and was inspired by his quest to locate high-quality child care experiences for his first child. Since that time, he has worked with hundreds of professionals to refine their personal teaching practices and enhance teaching environments for children. He is also a strong advocate for the inclusion of children with special rights into typically developing peer settings. Sean conducts research related to the sociomoral dimensions of school contexts as well as the pre- and in-service teacher experiences that promote developmentally appropriate practice. In conjunction with his university work, he provides keynotes, workshops, and consulting for public and private school systems. He designs professional experiences that bring participants in contact with theoretically based principles that they can practice and apply in an engaging, interactive format.

Holly Elissa Bruno, MA, JD, is a best-selling author, international keynote speaker, ground-breaking radio host and seasoned team builder. She served as Assistant Attorney General for the state of Maine and Assistant Dean at the University of Maine School of Law. An alumna of Harvard University's Institute for Educational Management, she teaches leadership courses for The McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership and Wheelock College. Holly Elissa's books include the best-selling, *What You Need to Lead an Early Childhood Program: Emotional Intelligence in Practice* (NAEYC, 2012), *Managing Legal Risks in Early Childhood Programs* (Columbia University's Teachers College Press, November 2012), and *Learning from the Bumps in the Road* (Redleaf Press, 2013). Her first book, *Leading on Purpose,* was published by McGraw-Hill in 2008 and her recent award-winning book, *Comfort of Little Things: An Educator's Guide to Second Chances,* was released by Redleaf Press in 2015. To 'recovering attorney' Holly Elissa, life is too short to anything but enjoy it daily.

Eva Marie does not want to cry. She wants instead to be strong and brave, not just to appear strong and brave. Eva Marie is an early childhood professional after all, charged with being the 'adult in the room,' that teacher whom parents can rely upon and trust.

Children adore Eva Marie's gentle, loving, and supportive approach although she acknowledges her 'soft' nature has its consequences. Not every family will love her, even though she wishes they would; mutually respectful parent-teacher bonding makes every interaction so much lighter and fulfilling.

Encountering emotionally-charged parents is Eva Marie's worst nightmare. Harsh criticism and ugly words quickly wound the heart that she wears on her sleeve. She has toughened up enough over the years to hold children to age-appropriate boundaries and to leave her work worries behind as she goes home to her own family. But confrontational relationships with adults are painful for Eva Marie, who wants everyone to be content.

Eva Marie freezes, willing herself to stay strong as Mr. Augustino and his wife, Dr. Burr, scream, "How could you let our baby, Isabella, get so disheveled? You know we want her clean and safe! And now you tell us she's been bitten again! How could you let that disturbed child come close to our Izzy! What were you thinking! Use your head! This is criminal. You are a poor excuse for a teacher! We demand to speak with the director!"

Floodgates bursting open, Eva Marie can't stop her scalding tears: tears of shame, tears of anger, tears of sadness, tears of fear. They burn on her cheeks as she tries to speak. But what on earth can she say that would help?

Maybe Izzy's parents are right. Maybe Eva Marie is flawed as a teacher. Maybe she should resign. Maybe Director LaKeisha will fire her for incompetence. Unbidden, a tauntingly sing-song, condemning voice sounds in her head: "Everybody hates me. Nobody loves me."

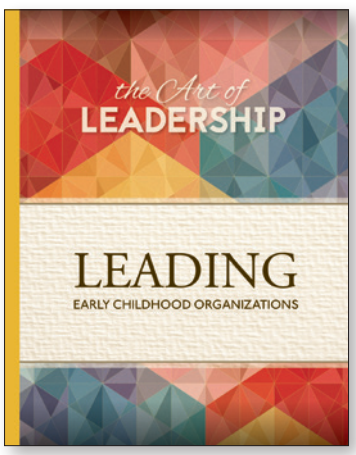
How would you advise teacher Eva Marie? Do you think she is in the right profession?

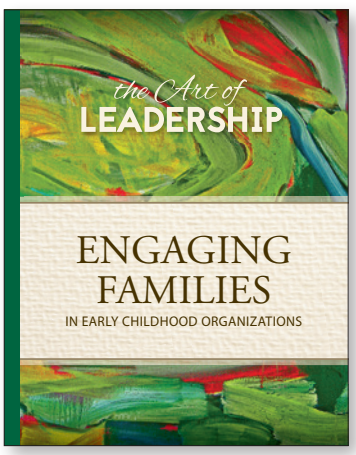
NEW FROM EXCHANGE!

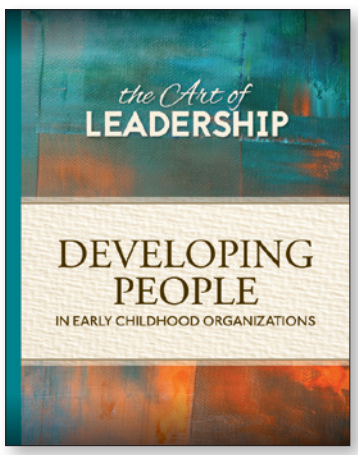
the Art of LEADERSHIP

Leading an early childhood program is more than a job...it's an art.

This comprehensive series of books examines every aspect of effective center management from A to Z. Offering the best advice and thinking from recognized experts on program administration, these books are designed to be comprehensive, hands-on training texts as well as ongoing reference tools for center administrators. The ideas presented are practical; the strategies are proven to work. *The Art of Leadership* is a developing series, with additional volumes scheduled for release later in 2016.







For more information and to order, visit www.ChildCareExchange.com or call (800) 221-2864.

www.ChildCareExchange.com
Exchange™
The Early Childhood Leaders' Magazine Since 1978
17725 NE 65th St, B-275, Redmond, WA 98052 • (800) 221-2864

play well with others while exhibiting positive behavior, how can we become better models during uncomfortable and unplanned times of confrontation?

- how can we retain our sensitivity, but stand tough when we are threatened?
- is developing a thick skin necessary to work effectively in our profession that is often perceived as thin-skinned?
- can we harden or soften our skin to meet each situation that unfolds?

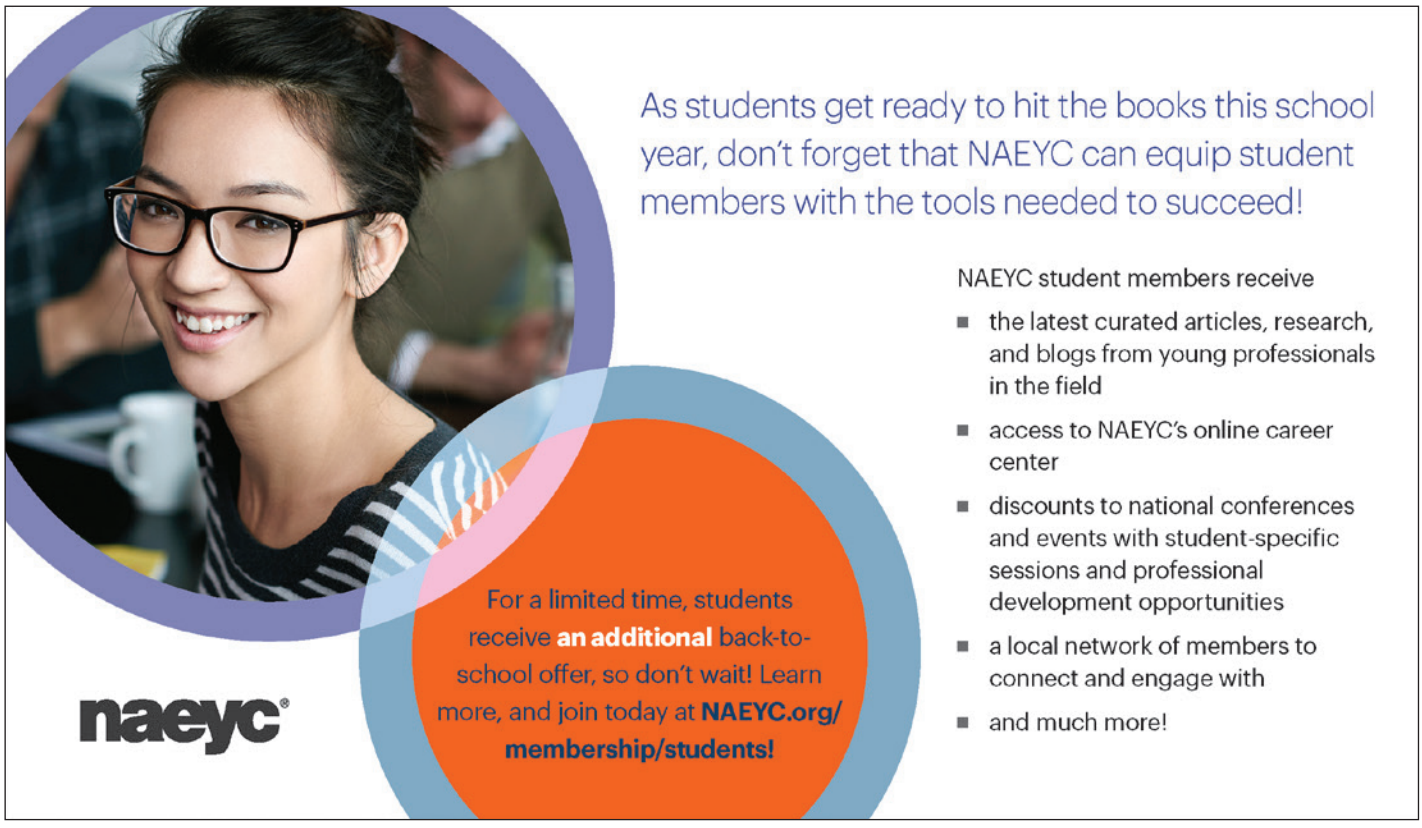
In this article, we explore communication and relationship management strategies that promote resilience, courage, and professionalism in situations where we may feel the expectation to avoid conflict and betray our true feelings.

A Thin-skinned Profession?

Early childhood professionals may feel constrained by a stereotype. Because we work with young children, we recognize that part of our job is, as Vivian Gussin Paley says, "To be nice. To be nice and be a model of niceness" (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2008). We lead with our hearts and relish being loved by children because of our gentleness, patience, and approachability. We take seriously the oft-remembered advice of Maya Angelou: "People will forget what you said; they will forget what you did; but people will never forget how you made them feel." Therefore, we feel deeply and are sensitive to the feelings of others. We care about nurturing, helping people (little and big) to grow, and being supportive and supported as peers. We do not want to hurt people's feelings or feel that we have failed as peacemakers.

Early childhood professionals overcome multiple challenges daily and personify resilience. However, when it comes to our relationships with each other, we can be reluctant to face obstacles head on. Research reveals that 80% of early childhood leaders are conflict avoidant and 70% of females take conflict personally. Males tend to work through conflicts more quickly and move on; females are more likely to forgive, but do not forget (Bruno, 2012).

We've all been there — that crunch point where Eva Marie found herself — and we know that early childhood education is our calling, yet in situations of conflict with adults, we want to run as fast and as far away as we can from the heat of the situation. And running makes perfect sense! Our brains and bodies are simply responding to the threat we feel. During emotional conflict, the pain center of our brain 'lights up' just as strongly when we are rejected, abandoned, or shamed as when we are physically slapped. However, when we understand our vulnerabilities and the thickness of our skin, we can find and practice strategies that will enable us to recognize threats, intelligently respect the signals our brain and body are giving us, and respond with courage.



Having a Thick Skin Matters

The stresses associated with relationships in the early childhood workplace are real. Relationship management is one of the four components of emotional intelligence — a critical quality for early childhood educators to understand. We understand our responsibilities to create caring communities of learners where children feel safe and enjoy a sense of belonging. At the same time, we must realize that how we manage conflict within our communities of practice is often underexplored and unaddressed (Achinstein, 2002). Research underscores an unpleasant truth: problems that we face with other adults, whether fellow teachers, families, or supervisors, spill over to affect children. Teachers often treat children the ways in which they have been treated (Milkie & Warner, 2011; Sarason, 1982).

How we manage our adult relationships, face and work through conflict, and maintain our 'emotional intelligence' is a critical part of the influential environment that we create for young children (Martinez, 2015). Behaviors like reacting emotionally to criticism, taking things personally, and complaining about the latest installment of workplace gossip reveals the thinness of our skin and jeopardizes the well-being of the children in our programs. Denial is an equally harmful choice. Because children are continuously subject to our modeling of how to handle frustration, deal with conflict, and maintain control of our emotions, we must name and face our vulnerabilities, honor ourselves, and put on a thicker skin.

What Does Thick Skin Look Like?

We recognize that how people handle themselves and their relationships (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002) is a complex endeavor. Especially in our work, an 'either/or' frame of mind can have unfortunate consequences.

Therefore, we recognize that the way in which we perceive our ability to relate to others cannot be completely understood with images of thick or thin skin. Some who can be described as thick-skinned are insensitive, inflexible, even rude. However, we understand that for the early childhood professional, our emotions are our skin — our largest asset for sensing and responding to the needs of those around us. This acute sense can be vulnerable, and attending to its health and integrity is worthwhile.

For us, the root of having a thick skin is the ability to keep our eyes on the prize: our chief responsibility of tending to the well-being and support of children and families. Being true to this mission, we can nurture ourselves through the bumps and scrapes that can accompany our work with adults. To do this, we must be centered in who we are — professionally, personally, and spiritually — so that when faced with a potential threat, we can respond logically with emotional intelligence. We identify our 'hot-button' issues and learn to recognize the signs that they have been pushed. We analyze and act.

Thick-skinned professionals care; however, they don't let immaturities cloud their professional judgment. At the same time, thick-skinned people understand personal boundaries. Practicing respect for these boundaries over time is what makes our skin thicker. When individuals encroach upon us, we respect ourselves enough to say, "Stop," and suggest that the interaction be refocused upon the problem rather than the person. We also recognize the boundaries of others and can identify common ground for finding solutions and developing mutual understanding. A thicker skin allows us to be knowledgeable of ourselves, our vulnerabilities, and also aware of effective ways to courageously defend our principles as we solve problems.

Photo by Simon Blackley (https://flic.kr/p/AxbaeA) licensed under CC BY 2.0

Toughening Up

How can we retain our dignity, exhibit respect for our feelings and those of others, *and* develop a thicker skin?

Start with one person: Yourself. Ask: What can I do to grow? What's a stumbling block I keep hitting? What's my Achilles heel? What are my buttons that everyone seems to know how to push? Our ability to reflectively assess our strengths and weaknesses is the key to unlocking every professional treasure.

Remind yourself: "It's not about me." Acknowledge the reality that the other person does not view the world (or the situation) as you do and that you are not likely to change that person or her point of view. Regardless of differences, you can offer adults the same unconditional positive regard that you give children. Literally sit on the same side of the table and acknowledge the other person's viewpoint and strengths: "We are both dedicated to making this work for children. How can we work together to make that happen?"

Respect your senses. In the moment, listen to your body (heart rate, sweaty palms, dry mouth, trembling hands) and recognize these physical responses before they jeopardize an appropriate response. Calmly and confidently say, "We need to find a less heated time to work through this." Call on your sense of humor. Lighten the moment. Laugh at yourself: "You guessed it! I felt you were criticizing me again. Now I see it wasn't about me. Let me take my thick-skinned pill so we can get to work."

Practice being courageous in conflict. Strengthen yourself with expressions that are both assertive and kind:

- "Here are the pros and cons of my approach."
- "Let's together identify and analyze the underlying issue."
- "Your point is well taken."
- "Can we agree to disagree?"
- "Let's ask our supervisor to help us."

Rehearsal doesn't remove stage fright, but who would think of performing well without it?

Invest in relationships. Sharing ourselves and our experiences authentically with others and opening ourselves up to those with whom we differ pays off when disagreements arise. Don't limit your relationships to those who are most like you. What might happen if we sought to build partnerships with those we like the least?

What Would Thicker-skinned Eva Marie Do?

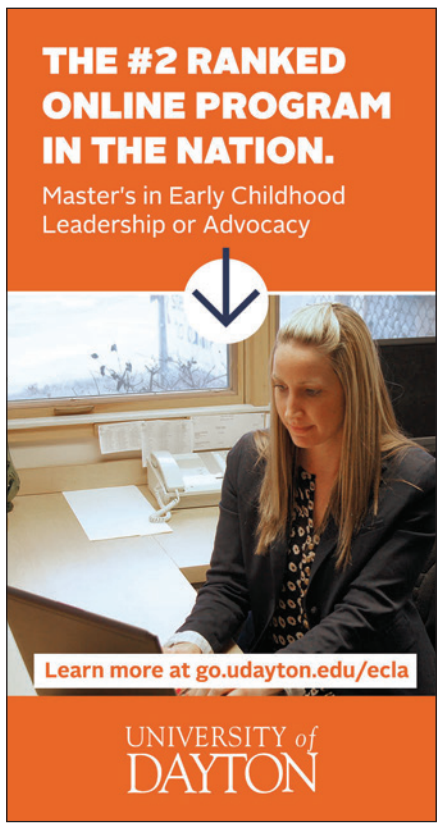
A thicker-skinned Eva Marie would probably recognize that in that moment of parental rage, she needs to listen and acknowledge how the parents see things. That thunderbolt moment might not be the time to address underlying differences. However, she needs also to respect herself and not allow herself to be verbally abused. By offering to call in director LaKeisha to help, Eva Marie demonstrates that she hears the parents, is open to resolving issues, and at the same time, does not have to accept accusations without back-up.

A thicker-skinned Eva Marie can act proactively by getting to know and build trust with Isabel's parents. Through numerous small interactions, consistent communication, and demonstrations of her understanding of child development, teachers can partner with families in handling the complexity of helping children grow. Carrying ourselves with dignity and demonstrating our expertise elicits respect from other adults.

A thicker-skinned Eva Marie knows herself and is able to recognize when her feelings begin to boil. She calls upon proven calming techniques, such as deep breathing or repeating a soothing phrase — such as "This too shall pass" — to maintain her composure.

She steps up and maintains professionalism when insults fly. She says, "Hold on. I recognize that you are very angry and want to see the director. Let's find out right now how soon we can make that happen." A thick-skinned Eva Marie is not a doormat but a doorway to problem solving, mutual respect, and children's well-being.

We can improve even the relationships we fear most. Many times our vulnera-



bilities can become our greatest strengths, and our most embarrassing limitation can, over time, become our most liberating trait. Author Henri Nouwen shares, "We are the most spiritual in the places we are the most broken." In this moment, do you feel thin-skinned? Thick-skinned? Know where you are so you understand what options you have when inevitable conflicts strike. May your present place be your touchpoint for growth and healing.

References

Achinstein, B. (2002). Conflict amid community: The micropolitics of teacher collaboration. *Teachers College Record, 104*(3), 421-455.

Bruno, H. E. (2012). *What you need to lead an early childhood program: Emotional intelligence in practice.* Washington, DC: NAEYC.

Goleman, D., Boyatzis, R., & McKee, A. (2002). *Primal leadership: Learning to lead with emotional intelligence.* Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Martinez, L. (2015). Developing teachers' social and emotional skills. *Edutopia*. Retrieved February 9, 2016: www.edutopia.org/blog/developing-teachers-social-emotional-skills-lorea-martinez

Milkie, M. A., & Warner, C. H. (2011). Classroom learning environments and the mental health of first grade children. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 52*(1), 4-22.

Sarason, S. B. (1982). *The culture of the school and the problem of change* (2nd ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Southern Poverty Law Center. (2008). *Starting small: Teaching tolerance in preschool and in the early grades.* Montgomery, AL: Teaching Tolerance, a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center.

—■—

In Our Experience

Holly Elissa

The thin-skinned challenge is that 'learning' gaps are often 'maturity' gaps. If admitting what we don't know is tough, admitting (our Achilles heel) fear of inadequacy as a person is exponentially tougher.

Recently, when I needed heart surgery, I bumped smack into my maturity gaps. Inside myself, I didn't need Mr. Augustino and Dr. Burr yelling at me, I had my own internal committee of critics: "You won't be able to face it. You'll freak out! You'll run screaming from the hospital in your Johnnie (hospital gown)!"

Denial that surgery was inevitable or trying to white-knuckle the surgery on my own? These were the approaches I was taught as a child and which I carried into adulthood. But these maturity gaps of mine would not serve me now.

So, I began to clumsily honor my thin-skinned self. I admitted my fear. I admitted I wasn't good at trusting doctors. I owned that I was terrified of going 'under the knife.' I shared my secret: I have PTSD from years of childhood abuse. I can't bear being on my back, vulnerable for almost five hours! I told my surgeon, my anesthesiologist, and my friends, and I asked for help. I talked so much about my fears and asked for so much help that by the time I got to the surgery, I could actually laugh. My thin skin developed resilience. My vulnerability had become my strength.

Sean

As a former Program Director, I understand the ever-present desire to improve a program, invest in staff, and advocate for resources that can further the mission. Many years ago, I was eager to see more child-centered practices in our infant-toddler programs. I had been inspired to emphasize sensitive and responsive care that promotes the autonomy and exploration of infants and toddlers and had shared articles, videos, and resources with the staff. But nothing was changing. Activities were still too regimented and the daily schedule was moving too fast. I would observe the classrooms and leave disappointed, thinking, "Why aren't these caregivers getting the message and enhancing their practice?"

One day in a staff meeting I was beating around the bush about our caregiving practices and a wise staff member said, "If there is something new that you want us to do, why don't you tell us?" I was floored. I had been avoiding having a conversation with the staff because I was afraid of them thinking I didn't approve of their work. But I wasn't fooling anyone. I was being thin skinned. I recognized my need to build stronger relationships and communicate more clearly.

You

What have you learned recently about your level of vulnerability? What would you like children to learn from you about how to deal with painful moments? Honestly, we are all 'works in progress.' Wherever you, Sean, or I happen to be, we can always model that we are open to learning how to live our lives in better alignment with our deepest values.